It happens all the time. A client tells me about a difficult situation they're dealing with and wants to know what to do. It's a fair question and I'm happy to help. The sad part is that more often than not, the difficult situation could have been avoided altogether. The sadder part is that it will most likely happen again.

Recurring problems usually indicate systemic issues. Resolving the current crisis doesn't fix the underlying issue. A healthy organizational culture makes some problems go away before they surface. Here are some examples:

- A staff member wastes hours on a task before discovering she misunderstood the assignment.

  Cultural solution: Create a culture where leaders and followers are expected to tenaciously insist on clarity when giving/receiving assignments. If an assignment is misunderstood, the leader accepts the responsibility for not being clear (don't blame the follower for selecting sky blue when you wanted royal blue but only said "blue") and the follower accepts responsibility for not insisting on clarity.

- A department head is upset because another department head made a decision he believed was his to make.

  Cultural solution: Well defined decision-making roles and processes that everyone abides by, including getting buy-in from all impacted parties before deciding. If we believe that takes too much time, we're underestimating the downstream time and morale impact of cleaning up after badly executed decisions.

- Staff morale sinks because of changes to the work environment (e.g. removing walls, background music, lighting, air temperature, cubicle size).

  Cultural solution: Two parts to this one: 1) Related to the decision-making point above, create a culture where input is sought and reasons are given for changes rather just announcing that we're doing this. How you do it matters at least as much as what you do. Even if they disagree, most people are more accepting if they know why and believe our intent is good. 2) Create a culture that puts the needs of others ahead of our own, sacrificing personal preferences for the common good (exemplified by the leaders). This defies the self-centered nature of humanity, so it isn't a change that happens overnight. It doesn't work to always be telling people to "take one for the team", but rewarding that behavior and telling success stories helps others recognize the personal benefits of personal sacrifice. As with all culture building, it also helps to hire the right kind of people to begin with.

A healthy culture reduces stress levels of leaders and followers. It creates an environment where even hard conversations can be healthy conversations. An unhealthy culture makes everything more difficult.

Culture changes aren't easy and must be pursued with consistency over time. But few investments will have a higher return.

You can continue travelling the rough, slow, unpaved road you're on, or choose to invest in paving that road with a healthy culture.

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